

Text: Ephesians 2:11-22
Title: God's love changes our relationships
DT: God's love reconciles and unites us.

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Dan Hamel

We've been studying the book of Ephesians together for the past several weeks, and we are learning how God's love changes every aspect of our lives. Today, as we continue in Ephesians chapter 2, we are going to see that **God's love changes our relationships**. This is such an important topic to discuss. So often we come to church and the focus is on you and God, you and God, you and God. And of course, the relationship with you and God really matters. But so much of the Bible is about your relationship with others. In fact, the Bible teaches that we can't have a right relationship with God unless we have a right relationship with others. Jesus says if you are coming to offer God a gift, and before you do you remember that someone back home has something against you...what should you do? Don't offer your gift to God...Go home and make the relationship right. Only after your relationship with the person is made right can your relationship with God be right. Remember what it says in 1 John 4:20 **Whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.**

Clearly this is something we need God's help with. We live in such a fractured and fragmented world. Some of the divisions are mostly for fun and games. Colts and the Patriots. Cardinals and Cubs. Purdue vs. IU. Where I come from it's UK vs. Louisville (Which we affectionately referred to as loserville). College basketball can get intense. One time I was driving behind a guy on a winding, two lane road. This guy was all over the place, crossing the line, erratically speeding up, and slowing down. I thought he may have been intoxicated, so I backed off a ways just in case. Then I saw him flick his cigarette butt out the window and my annoyance level surged. But it's just a small piece of litter; don't get too worked up. Wait another minute-he throws a fast food bag of trash out his car window. I was so mad. I thought, "This guy is horrible, I should call the cops!" But I figured it wasn't worth it. Then when we came to a light and I was right behind him I saw that he had a Louisville sticker on his car...That was the last straw! I called the police right away! No kidding.

We all have surface-level issues that divide us. Then we have moderate level issues that divide us. We move away from the teams we root for, to the politicians we vote for; and it gets a bit deeper, doesn't it? So many voices today from the far left and the far right. Everyone seems to be screaming! They've done a lot of research to see who is behind those voices from the far left and far right...Do you know who it is? On both sides, it's extremely wealthy white people who are using their money to try to push their ideological agendas on the rest of us. Everything seems so polarized. Where are the calm, wise, rational voices in the middle?

There are surface level issues that divide us, moderate-level issues that divide us, and then there are deep issues... like our core beliefs about God. A 2015 study by the Barna Group found that, on average, 91% of our close friends have the exact same or nearly the exact same religious beliefs as we do. So more or less, our tendency is to draw a circle around ourselves and say, "The only people who can get in are those who look like me, think like me, and see the world like me."

And that's just generalities. When it comes to specific relationships, actual individuals, we know that division happens there, as well. Someone drops the ball. Someone bails on you, lets you down or hurts you. Expectations aren't met. Words are said in anger. Something happens that's unfair. Even if at one time you were really close-best friends, business partners, maybe even someone in your family-now there is a great divide and you barely speak.

We need God's love to change our relationships. Two years ago, as we were preaching through Matthew I taught on forgiveness. That sermon had three times as many downloads as we typically have. Three times as many! Why is that? Because we all have relationships that are broken and we need God's help. Let's open up Ephesians 2 and dive in. **11 Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (which is done in the body by human hands)— 12 remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, 15 by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations.**

This is a dense and weighty theological passage! Paul is reminding the Ephesians that before Christ, there were two groups of people in the world: The Jews and the Gentiles. Or in other words, the Jews, and everyone else. The Jews are the ones God made promises to: they had the Scriptures; they had the patriarchs; they had the blessing and favor of God. And there was great animosity between them and everyone who wasn't like them. Jews looked down on Gentiles and called them ignorant, morally depraved dogs. Gentiles looked down on the Jews with the same level of disdain and animosity. They said they were backward, behind the times, and spiritually myopic--the idiocy to believe that there was only one God when clearly they knew there was a pantheon of deities to be worshipped. These two groups had no love lost, they were constantly waging war against one another!

And one of the ways you could see the hostility that existed between the two was through the way they worshipped in the Jewish temple. **Here is a picture of the temple.** The temple was set up with common places where the entire community--Jews and Gentiles could worship. But then there were places that only Jews could worship. And then there were places that only priests could worship. And then there was the Holy of Holies, at the very center of the temple, where God himself manifested presence in a powerful way. Only the high priest could go...and he could only go there once a year. The Holy of Holies was protected by a thick curtain that kept people outside of God's presence. But do you remember what the Scriptures say happened when Jesus died on the cross? Matthew 27:51 says "**At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.**" The division that kept people away from God's presence was done away with. All people everywhere can come near to God and worship him. So profound!

But that's not the point Paul is making in this passage. In Ephesians, Paul is saying that the curtain that kept people away from God's presence is not the only barrier Jesus did away with on the cross **2:14 For Christ himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.** This barrier, this dividing wall is a

reference to a real, historic wall that existed in the temple. Jewish archeologists have uncovered a sign on that wall from the temple in the 1st century. **Here it is**, from the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. The inscription in this sign reads. No Gentile is to go beyond this wall around the sanctuary enclosure. Whoever is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his death which will follow.

There wasn't just a barrier that kept people at a distance from God; there was a barrier that kept people at a distance from other people. And just like Jesus destroyed the barrier between God and people, what did he do to the barrier between people and other people? He destroyed that one, too. Paul is saying that the power of the cross is greater than we think. The beams of the cross not only run vertical and have the power to bridge the gap between a perfect God and imperfect people who have sinned against him, the beams of the cross run horizontal and have the power to bridge the gap between imperfect people and other imperfect people, oftentimes who have sinned against one another. Ephesians says that Jesus has taken two groups and done what? Made them one. **2:14 For Christ himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.**

Have you stopped to consider what a profound theological statement that is? Again, the focus is almost always on us and God. But this right here is on us and other people. Joseph Hellerman says: **“Something else happened when we were saved, which is just as real in God’s eyes as our justification. Something I like to call family-fication. Just as we are justified with respect to God the father upon salvation, so also we are family-fied with respect to our brothers and sisters in Christ. And this family-fication is no less a reality than our justification.** People who were enemies of God become his sons and daughters. People who were enemies with one another become brothers and sisters.

One of the most powerful examples I've ever heard of this comes from Rwanda. Many of you know the civil war and genocide that hit **Rwanda in 1994**. The Hutus and the Tutsis began fighting against one another. There were raids on villages. Kidnapping. Rape. Mutilation. In just a few weeks time, 800,000 people were killed. The killing didn't take place at the hands of an army, it took place at the hands of neighbors and coworkers, fueled and inflamed by ethnic hatred, armed with machine guns and machetes. Many of the images of the carnage are too graphic to show, but the picture of this **mass grave shows you the aftermath**. How do you work toward forgiveness and reconciliation in a context like Rwanda? How do you reconcile with someone who killed your family members? Many said it couldn't be done. But one person after the next after the next been touched by the grace of God.

This is Alice on the left. In 1994, Nkundiye, the man on the right, entered her home with a machete and killed every member of her family. She played dead under the body of her brother in law. After years in prison, Nkundiye wanted to meet Alice to ask for her forgiveness. When Alice first saw him, she was so traumatized she was sent to the hospital for ten days. After gaining her strength, they met up again. She said, **“After some time, I was able to forgive him. I believe it was the power of God.”** On occasion, she even babysits Nkundiye's children. Look at these two men, **Callixte and Andrew**. Callixte, the man on the left, killed Andrew's father. After serving years in prison, these two men found themselves a part of the same church service. The pastor was preaching on reconciliation. They both said it felt like he was talking right to

them. They said **“The light of Christ shined on our hearts. It has set us free. It has set our families free.”** Not only have they become friends, today they travel together to prisons, visiting people who committed the genocide who are still incarcerated and talking to them about reconciliation.

The power of God, the light of Christ has brought unity where no one ever thought there could be unity. Jews and Gentiles. Hutus and Tutsis. There is no barrier built up, no matter how tall, that Jesus cannot tear down. No chasm, no matter how wide, that Jesus can't fill in. Listen to how the passage continues: **His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, 16 and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.** Think about how profound that statement is. Imagine being in a room that represents all the greatest hostility that exists in humanity. People on both sides of Apartheid in South Africa. Nazis and Jews from Germany. Slaves and slaves owners from America. Imagine all the animosity. All the hatred. All the wounds. And what does the Bible say? Jesus **put to death their hostility**. Jesus not only puts to death the wrath of God against people, he puts to death the wrath of people against people.

The passage continues: **17 He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. 19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.**

The intimacy and interconnectedness in this passage gets deeper and deeper. Paul says we are **fellow citizens**. Then he says we are **family members**. Then he says we are **built on the same foundation**. We are like bricks that are mortared together. We all have a connection to people who are from the same country and culture as us. We have even more in common with people who were raised in the same house as us. Think about how many bricks in the same building are united. They are literally stuck together! Paul says that's what has happened to us in Christ. That's what the church is! God has taken people from every conceivable different walks of life, brought them together and said, “This is a new nation, a new family, this is a new building. And what is this building for? Look at 2:22 **And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.** God brings us together, and then he dwells powerfully in our midst...in the midst of people who were at one time hostile to one another. **Justin Martyr**. A devout Christian who gave his life for Christ in the 2nd Century said this: **“We used to hate and destroy one another and refused to associate with people of another race or country. Now, because of Christ, we live together with such people and pray for our enemies.”** What gives someone the power to say that? God's love changes our relationships. Have you ever stopped to ask the question: who were the first people to really champion diversity and inclusivity? The answer is the church. Historically speaking, the church is the very first community in the world that indiscriminately welcomed people from every tribe, every culture, every language, both genders, regardless of class or status or wealth or rank, the church welcomed everyone. Before the church, nothing like this ever existed or had even been considered possible.

All of this is theological. All of this is big picture stuff. I want to spend our remaining time together going from the 10,000-foot view to the 10-inch view. When we talk about relationships, we have to get up close and personal because it's not enough to talk about the unity between Jews and Gentiles and about people groups that need to be reconciled. That's all good and wonderful, but what do we do with the relationships in our lives that need to be reconciled? What do we do when we have division in our own relationships that need to be healed? How do we live out the words from 1 John 4:20 that we started with? **Whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.** Let me humbly suggest three steps:

(1) Acknowledge any hostility in your heart toward others. Take a moment right now and give thought to that. Ask God to show you the contours of your heart, how it truly works and why. Whom is there *active* hostility toward? Whom is there *passive* hostility toward? One of your parents? One of your siblings? Your spouse? Your ex-spouse? Your co-worker? Your boss? Your neighbor? A politician? People of a different race? It is so, so, so important that we know our own hearts, and what is really going on deep inside of us. In our hearts we all have some level of active and passive hostility towards other people. Healing will never take place until we acknowledge that it's there. But acknowledgment is just the first step.

Next we need to **(2) Ask Jesus to change your heart.** Wherever there may be hostility, Jesus wants to bring peace. And for that peace to come, our hearts need to be changed. They need to be healed. Jesus one time told a story about a man who owed a billion-dollar debt. And the man he owed it to forgave him and let him go free. Then that man who had been forgiven a billion dollars went out, found someone who owed him \$10,000 and had him thrown into prison because he could not pay. That man's personal debt had been forgiven, but his heart wasn't healed. He was still calloused and angry and proud. Can you believe that?! A man who had been forgiven so much, unable and unwilling to forgive someone else??? Can you believe that?! Of course you can. Because you do it all the time. And so do I. Our unwillingness to forgive someone has much less to do with the wrong they commit against us and much more to do with the condition of our own heart. Unforgiveness exposes areas where our own hearts have not yet been touched by the grace of God. I don't know whom there is hostility in your heart toward right now, but ask Jesus to take you from a posture that looks like this (angry, clenched fists) to a posture that looks like this (relaxed, open handed).

Acknowledge hostility in our hearts, ask Jesus to change our hearts, and then **(3) Aim for Christ-centered reconciliation.** Christ-centered reconciliation isn't pretending nothing happened. It's not whitewashing the past. It's not saying that you will necessarily trust that person the way you did before. It's not simply playing nice on the outside while boiling up on the inside. Christ-centered reconciliation is saying, "Because of Christ...Because he loves me and he loves you, because he died for me and died for you, because we are brothers and sisters in his family, because he destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, we need God's love to heal our relationship. Now the other person may not always respond the way you had hoped. Reconciliation requires two people and sometimes the other person isn't ready or willing at this time. There are some things we can't control, but this is what the Scripture says to us: **"As far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."** Romans 12:18

As a minister, it's not uncommon for me to be with families who have lost a loved one. The death of a family member has an incredible ability to help people get over the past. Not every time, but sometimes people who have not spoken in years because of a deep-seated grudge will look at one another, break down in tears, and embrace. In light of this person's death whom we both love, who loved both of us, our issues are worth putting behind us. Maybe you've seen something like that in your own life. That very reality should be at work every time we reflect on the death of Jesus. Yeah, we might have some issues. Maybe we still don't see eye to eye. But in light of the cross of Jesus, our Messiah was torn apart on the cross for us, we can get over it. Because one of the last things he ever asked for was for us to get along. **My prayer is for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you....I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— 23 I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. John 17:20-23** How is the world going to know that God is real? By seeing the way we love one another!

Jon Tyson says it this way: **“Jesus isn't interested in 30,000-foot meta-level symbolic love; he is interested in local love. How we actually love the people in our own community who we share life with, that is the thing that is most important to him.”** Local love, that's what Jesus wants.

Do you want to know one of the most powerful steps any two people who are at odds with one another can do together to find unity and reconciliation? **Pray together.** That may seem impractical or overly pious, but you have no idea the healing power found in prayer. Look one more time at **2:18 For through Christ we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.** What are we told here? Through Christ we **both** have **access** to the Father by one Spirit. What if instead of simply praying and asking God to heal your heart and heal the relationship, you went to them and said, “can we pray together?” Can we get on our knees together? Seek God together? I know this is a huge step. I know this is a risky and vulnerable step. But you will find healing on your knees, in the presence of God that you just won't find anywhere else. Husbands and wives...if you are having an argument, the best thing you can possibly do is quit fighting and pray. When your kids are fighting, instead of just forcing them to say, “I'm sorry,” teach them to pray together and ask God to heal their relationship, teaching them to love one another and forgive one another. I don't know who you may have distance or hostility in your heart against today. But if they are believers and you can find a way to make it happen, pray together. The warmth of God's love melts hearts that are ice cold. The tenderness of God's love softens hearts that are hard as a rock. God's love changes our relationships.